
ENVIRONMENTAL Fact Sheet



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Common Reed Becoming a Common Nuisance

Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*)



Species Description

- Tall perennial grass standing up to 15 feet tall
- Smooth hollow stem
- Purple-brown inflorescence that droops like a feather
- Extensive rhizome system that can stretch 20 feet in length, and 5 feet or more in depth
- Reproduces by seed, rhizome buds, or rhizome fragments
- Blooms from July to September
- Seeds dispersed November through January

Species Range and Distribution

Common reed is found on every continent except Antarctica. It is a problem in most parts of the United States. However, in Europe and some parts of the U.S., it is in decline and may be a protected species. In Europe, common reed is a valuable resource, used in making thatch for houses.

How Was Common Reed Introduced?

There is much debate over whether common reed is a native plant to the United States. Strong evidence shows that common reed was established in the U.S. before European contact, but that it was a different genotype. It has been suggested that a new, more invasive genotype(s) native to Europe was later introduced in the late 1800s.

Where Does Common Reed Invade?

Common reed can be found in almost any sunny, temperate zone wetland. It is common in alkaline and brackish wetlands, but is not limited to them. It can also flourish in acidic wetlands, and tropical zone

wetlands. Common reed occurs along riverbanks, lake margins, fens and marshes. It can also be found in disturbed soils, such as roadsides, dredged areas, polluted areas, and nutrient-rich sites.

What Makes Common Reed A Good Invader?

Common reed is a quick spreading invader, which reduces the ability of slower, native plants to colonize. The litter accumulation from dead leaves and stems can also prevent native plants from growing. These dense, monotypic stands of common reed are nearly impenetrable, giving little food or shelter to wildlife. Common reed has no natural predators on this continent, contributing more to its invasiveness.

How Does Common Reed Spread?

Common reed can spread by seed, rhizomes, or rhizome fragments. Seeds disperse from November to January. Changes such as an increase in salinity can promote seed germination. Nutrient runoff from farms and urban areas greatly encourages growth of common reed. Rhizomes bud in late summer, and can cover many feet. Fragments of rhizomes, such as pieces broken by boat activity, can re-establish themselves readily.

What Good is this Plant?

Some studies have shown that due to its extensive rooting system, common reed is good for stabilizing loose soils. Also, this plant is efficient in taking up both nutrients and metals, thereby purifying the water. Due to its invasive nature, however, it is not recommended for planting.

Why Is Common Reed a Problem?

The dense stands of common reed effectively inhibit the growth of many important native plants, like Cattail and others. Without these native plants, the native wildlife suffers from lack of suitable shelter and forage. Common reed has established itself in many areas, and is starting to invade pristine areas. The adaptability of common reed to almost any wetland type allows it to spread fast. A larger spread of common reed could lead to great losses of native plants and animals. This could interfere with the effectiveness of wildlife refuges around the United States. The accumulation of dead leaves and stems can also increase the potential for marsh wildfires.

For more information on the common reed or other Exotic Species, please contact the Exotic Species Coordinator at (603) 271-2248 or visit the NHDES website at <https://www.des.nh.gov/>.